SHALL WE DANCE
2 Samuel 6:12-15; Psalm 150; John 15:9-11
February 18, 1968

One of the most moving stories in the Old Testament, and one of the most important events in the history of the Israelite Nation is recorded in the Second Book of Samuel. Saul, the first King of Israel, was dead; the Elders of the nation had chosen a popular, young folk-hero named David, the son of Jesse, to be his successor. David had his work cut out for him. The enemies of Israel were gathered in battle array, prepared to deal the young nation a fatal blow. But David, using sound military strategy, defeated them one by one, until only Jerusalem remained to be taken. This too was accomplished and the people rejoiced as people do when they are free. It was a time to do something that would express the goodness of the moment; the Ark of the Covenant, the symbol of Israel's life-in-relationship with God would finally be carried into the city on behalf of the whole nation. The King himself expressed the joy of this momentous occasion - "And David danced before the Lord with all his might."

At first thought, a sermon with a title "Shall We Dance" might seem a bit too flippant, too irreverent. But before you render that judgment, allow me to explain a little of what I have in mind. Since the earliest days of recorded history dancing has been one of the enduring forms of self expression. When David's joy was too intense to be contained any longer he "danced with all his might". There is a little of that in the lusty folk dances in Central Europe and the Balkans. American Indians danced before and after battle. Ancient men danced as an act of prayer: they danced to express grief and joy. As an art-form, there is nothing more expressive than bodily movement, best illustrated in the discipline of ballet. Dancing is one of the ways men in all ages have expressed the deep feelings that at times are inexpressible in words alone.

The anthem this morning contains that fascinating thought: the theology is clear and articulate. God had something he wanted to communicate. And so he danced the dance of creation, and he came down from heaven and danced the birth of Jesus Christ. With unerring consistency the life of Christ - teaching, calling, healing, dying, rising again - is seen as a dance - a self-expression - a word from God.

Life is a dance, the anthem is saying: "Christ is the Lord of life. 'Dance wherever you may be - I'll lead you in the dance,' said He" You can't very well argue with that statement. It is certainly more to the point than some of the obscure sentiment contained in our hymnbook.

But I wouldn't anticipate your being as concerned about the theology as about the whole idea if dancing as a subject relevant to the Church of Jesus Christ. So let's look again, thinking further about the word "dance". Basically, dancing is a joyful exercise. The one theme that runs through nearly all forms of dancing is a kind of joy that bubbles over and just cannot be adequately expressed. One of the best illustrations of that I've ever seen came across the television screen last week in the delightful half hour special, "He's Your Dog, Charlie Brown". That, of course, was a whole lot more than a cartoon; and at several points it illustrated perfectly the idea I am trying to convey. Charlie Brown and Snoopy were separated from each other as the result of obstinancy, misunderstanding, and Snoopy's general capacity for making a nuisance of himself. Charlie Brown had handled the situation badly and at the moment of reunion there was obvious repentance on both sides - at least for a moment. There occurred one brief moment of reconciliation when Charlie Brown and his dog joined hands and threw themselves into a joyful, exuberant dance.

Dancing, and the music which is necessary for dancing has always served this kind of function. And so it is logical that music and dancing have been appropriate forms of worship. David danced with all his might. Psalm 150 urged the worshipper to praise God with the trumpet, lute and harp: Praise God with timbrel, strings, pipe, cymbal - and with the dance.

Sometimes I think we need nothing so desperately as that. If the author of that great Psalm were to hear us mumbling our way through the hymn of praise on Sunday morning he might think that God is, indeed, dead. He surely would wonder what happened to his Psalm.

Certainly there is little, at least on the surface, to indicate that we're glad to be here, and that beneath our liturgy is an overflowing joy in the goodness and graciousness of God. We have managed, in our day, so to divorce religion from profound expressions of joy that nothing could be further from our mind than dancing. In worship, as in life, we are concerned with conformity, with remaining hidden in the crowd, with staying cool and calm and collected. We don't want to become enthusiastic, at least expressively enthusiastic about anything, particularly things religious.

The result is a certain pomposity in worship, a lack of aliveness that makes the whole routine rather dull. But then, we're not just talking about the experience of corporate worship, for life is like that. In our common life the cards are stacked against freedom of expression; anxiety is in the air; regimentation is the by-word, from the way we dress to the way we think politically, to the way we eat. We like the safe feeling of concensus - and there is no room in that for anything so personal, so intensely individualistic as a good, sound expression of pure joy. Yet there are among us those who would take exception, several representatives of whom have the good sense to bring the music of dancing and joy into our solemn assemblage.

The whole idea of dance as a form of worship, or even as a idea appropriate to the conveyance of the thrust of our Christian faith, is alien to us - to some of us that is; some of us who happen now to be a minority. The majority of Americans, at this moment, happen to be young people under 25, and if there is anything they are not it is pompous, phony or dull. They exude enthusiasm for life, they strain to be free of the strictures of adult life, they rebel at being made to voluntarily enter some of the prisons of adulthood. If there is anyone left in the world who knows how to be joyful, how to teach us the art and practice of joyful living, it is our own youth.

Numerically, they are the majority, and this fact alone has given rise to a whole "youth culture" that exists within, but independent from the mainstream of American culture. Commercially, young people today are the major market. Time magazine this week ran an article describing the growing credit card business among teen agers. Advertising, of course, has long understood the numerical strength of youth, and the potent force of youth culture. Advertisers have learned quickly that deep within every American heart there lingers the fantasy of youth. More than half of us may be young, but a good portion of the other half are pretending they are.

Fashions are set by the young; the astronauts, the Kennedy brothers together have created an image of youthful leadership and conquest. About the only thing youth culture does not influence tremendously, or even seem to be concerned about, is religion. We'll return to the implications of that later.

Youth culture exists as a reaction against adult culture, a protest against what adulthood has come to mean in our day. And it is significant that dancing is perhaps the point at which the line is most sharply drawn. Youth is joyful, but irreverent: youth reveres sincerity but abhores phoniness: integrity is in, pomposity is out. Young people ask serious questions: young people delight in slaughtering sacred cows and observing our embarrassed pain. The stereotype adult response is to indict youth in general as immoral, irresponsible and irreverent. Let's listen to how one young man answered: "Look at you, blowing up whole countries for the sake of some crazy ideologies that you don't live up to anyway. Look at you, conning a whole generation of kids into getting a revolving charge account, and buying your junk. (Who's a junkie?) Look at you, needing a couple of stiff drinks before you can talk with another human being. Look at you, making it with your neighbor's wife on the sly just to try and prove that you're really alive. Look at you, hooked on your cafeteria of pills, and making up dirty names for anyone who isn't in your bag; and messing up the land and the water and the air for profit, and calling this nowhere scene the Great Society! And you're gonna tell us how to live. C'mon man, you've got to be kidding!" (p.28, It's Happening, Simmons and Wingrad)

That kind of talk frightens us because it's so honest. That particular polemic was delivered, of course, by a Hippie. It would be a mistake to characterize all young people as Hippies. And it would, it seems to me, be less than responsible to glorify what amounts to an infantile retreat from the reality of life. And yet there is a kinship here - a common suspicion of the Establishment with its staid decorum; its herd of sacred cows, its ethic that nobody cares about - which is shared with the entire mentality of youth culture.

I believe that the adult world - and particularly the part of the adult world that calls itself Christian-has a lot of things to learn from the youth culture, and the clear responsibility to make a creative response.

Two things specifically: the first is integrity. That's an important word for young people and they don't have to be very perceptive to discover that it is not an important word in the adult world. Young people look at our world, and see, time and time again, that honesty just doesn't pay. Woe to the father who cheats on his income tax and pads his expense account and then tries to sermonize on the evils ofcheating on a test. Woe to the father who displays his bigotry and then lectures his college son on patriotism. Woe to the adult world that glorifies sexuality and then hides behind the puritan ethic. Youth are demanding integrity and we'd better learn to deliver the goods.

A very significant event occurred last summer. The Beatles, who are the living symbols of youth culture, were offered one million dollars to do two concerts in New York's Shea Stadium. They turned it down because the kind of music they were doing couldn't be performed in that way, and they refused to perform their old numbers - just for money. Youth culture loves that kind of integrity because they know it never would have happened in the adult world. They are conscious of the fact that they live in a world of people who would do anything for a million dollars.

We ought to be learning something here about integrity.

The second thing we ought to be hearing is a word about joy and exuberance. We began by thinking about dancing, and it is in dancing that young people best express the joy and sheer happiness in being alive that is sadly absent from our lives - and particularly our worship. I think this is one reason why organized religion is not particularly meaningful to the young. They read the 150 Psalm and then they see a sanctuary full of long faced people who look, for all the world as if they are engaging in corporate mourning, and they smell something very phony.

The Old Testament readings this morning, along with the words of the anthem, were an invitation to dance - to engage in worship by expressing the sheer joy of being a child of God. The anthem, using a tune that is contemporary and an instrument that is common, and people who are very much alive - is an invitation to all of us to express the profundities of our religious faith in ways that are authentic and real.

We live in a joyless age: current events weigh heavily in our thinking. Why should there be joy? What reason is there to dance? Isn't it irresponsible while turmoil happens all about us?

Here is the point at which dancing and Christian Faith converge. The real cause for celebration - the real reason why singing and dancing ought to characterize Christian Faith - is found in Jesus Christ. At the end of a conversation with his disciples he said: "These things I have spoken to you that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full." (He meant that literally, I suspect).

What if there is a God, and that God who has created and ordered all things also fashioned man after his image? What if that God so loved that man that he came to live with him and die for him? What if that God has opened the door to a new kind of life - a life that begins now and proceeds roughshod right over death? What if that God keeps coming to man, loving him as he is?

That is the Gospel of Jesus Christ. That is the news which men, for 2,000 years, have called good. That is the word God has spoken to each one of us.

<u>Shall we dance</u>? That may be a flippant, irreverent suggestion. And then it just might be an appropriate suggestion, at that!

Help us, our Father, to know the goodness of Thy love. Grant us the gift of laughter. May our lives be filled to overflowing with joy of Thy presence. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.